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## THE SWERVERS

PHILOFICTION CLINAMEN, MARXISM, MATERIALISM, NON-PHILOSOPHY

A key issue from my recently concluded seminar on the non-human was how to characterize contemporary theory. Previously I've discussed materialism, as well as the distinction between the ethical and political, and also the curious cocktail of pragmatism, empiricism, and realism that seems to dominate so much writing today. But after reading and working through a variety of texts I wanted to propose a series of themes that seem to run through much contemporary writing in critical and cultural theory.

The first theme comes directly from poststructuralism, a kind of filtered or modified riff on the old poststructuralist language of gaps, traces, supplements, patchiness, mixing, messiness. These are still the virtues of the day. As Wendy Brown puts it in *Undoing the Demos*, we must attend to "supplement," "slippage," and a world that "does not fully cohere" (215). Anna Tsing has talked about patches and patchiness (as has Kathleen Stewart). Tsing also connects this with the notion of entanglement, or what she calls a "mosaic of open-ended assemblages of entangled ways of life" (*Mushroom*, 4). Patrick Jagoda, in his recent book on *Network Aesthetics*, describes "a world that is messy, uncertain" (102) in an attempt to show "an ambivalent sensitivity to the riskiness and complicatedness inherent to all intimacies" (180). For his part Hiroki Azuma is concerned with "an endless movement of slipping sideways" (*Otaku*, 105). And in one of the most powerful sections of *Habeas Viscus*, Alexander Weheliye evokes "the sorrow songs, smooth glitches, miniscule movements, shards of hope, scraps of food, and interrupted dreams of freedom that already swarm the ether" (131). Let's dwell in his language: glitches, shards, scraps, interruptions, swarms. This is a very specific vocabulary.

At the same time, my seminar and I identified an attention to *pragmatic* concerns, from action and production, to expression, creativity, performance, and experimentation. At play here is the old philosophical distinction between being and doing, the former a question of presence or existence and the latter a question of will, event, or action. Recall when Deleuze confessed his desire "to remove essences and to substitute events in their place" (*Logic of Sense*, 53). Now nearly fifty years after Deleuze wrote that, it's not uncommon for a contemporary theorist to say that the being of an entity does not matter, what matters is the doing. As Benjamin Bratton recently put it, "Platforms are what platforms do" (*Stack*, 41). Jasbir Puar says something similar about assemblages: "There are thus numerous ways to define what assemblages *are*, but I am here more interested in what assemblages *do*" (emph. added). We may describe this approach as post- or anti-hermeneutic in that it tends to focus more on

function, performance, or modeling rather than representation, mimesis, or meaning. Weheliye agrees with this pragmatic turn as well, writing that “Assemblages are inherently productive, entering into polyvalent becomings to produce and give expression to previously nonexistent realities, thoughts, bodies, affects, spaces, actions, ideas, and so on” (*Habeas Viscus*, 46). From word to deed, it seems that Goethe was correct after all: *In the beginning was the deed!*

Indeed, all this doing is adding up. The shift from an existential to an ergodic analysis entails a concomitant shift in the general foundations of the world. This new world is described in terms of *process* not stasis. Becoming is the order of the day, not being. In Jane Bennett’s estimation, our ontology is “a turbulent, immanent field in which various and variable materialities collide, congeal, morph, evolve, and disintegrate” (*Vibrant Matter*, xi). Here we see the triumph of process philosophy, and an indication of the immense influence that thinkers like Whitehead and Deleuze have had on contemporary thought. It’s a kind of *gerund sublime* in which becoming triumphs over mere existence. If the old mantra of leftist theory was “always historicize,” the new mandate for today has shifted dramatically: “Always deterritorialize!” The temporal axis has given way to a spatial context; the existential to the ergodic. Which reveals an interesting irony: vulgar Marxists used to analyze ergodic activities in terms of time; but today materialists tend to spatialize ergodic processes, while retaining very few vestiges of Marxism and often discarding temporality altogether.

Perhaps this accounts for the preponderance of *assemblage* theory in recent years. If the *gerund sublime* has taken over, if the world is populated by ergodic machines, and if they are indeed so messy, uncertain, slippery, and patchy, then it makes sense to migrate to that most useful Deleuzian structure, the assemblage. The assemblage is a good way to account for multiplicity and difference, a good way to think beyond dualisms. With its internal heterogeneity, the assemblage allows us to move beyond things like objects or discrete entities, and think instead in terms of forces, fields, and networks. Many thinkers will simply conflate the assemblage with a secondary host of concepts—among them ecology, ecosystem, environment, decentralization, and distribution—the notion being that thinking in terms of assemblages means thinking ecologically (and that thinking ecologically means being a good moral actor). No matter that ecology has less to do with assemblage than it does to a word like economy, both stemming from the Greek root meaning house or household; in other words the “economy” originally referred to the circulation and store of goods in and out of the household, and an “ecology” represents the interaction and balance of such circulation.

As I’ve been hinting much of this may be summed up in terms of a very particular debate within *materialism*. Previously I described this as a debate between Reticular Empiricists and Generic Communists. Bennett puts it in stark terms when she admits that she “pursue[s] a materialism in the tradition of Democritus-Epicurus-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze more than Hegel-Marx-Adorno” (*Vibrant Matter*, xiii). Is one string of names more political than the other? Perhaps, although the dialecticians will have one answer, the Deleuzians another. But the difference between the two groups is clear enough. The Deleuzian strain stems from a tradition of a radical materialism — “God or nature” was Spinoza’s famous formulation — while the other tradition puts the dialectic at its center, that is, the cycles of negation, estrangement, and alterity, but also their resolution through expression, realization, and an encounter with the other.

Bennett omits one important name: Lucretius. He’d be added to the first roster of course. Democritus-Epicurus-Lucretius-Spinoza-Diderot-Deleuze. And Lucretius, a Roman, acts as a key link between the ancient Greek atomists and the medieval and ultimately modern variants of radical materialism, wherein atomism means something very different indeed (and we know that Deleuze was no atomist). For it is in Lucretius that we discern one of the key aspects of materialist philosophy: the *clinamen* or swerve.

But what is this *clinamen*? What is this swerve? As the ancient story goes, there exist atoms in the void. Atoms fall, they fall through the void. But then, at a certain point, one of the atoms “inclines” or swerves. A small deviation or inclination is introduced into the consistency of atoms and void. The atoms may fall, but from time to time they will not fall in the same direction. And in this misdirection or inclination a whole new spark of life resides. Here is the genesis of all creation, of all change, all newness, of the world as such. “An atom is deviated,” Badiou wrote, and “the world can come into being.” (*TotS*, 58). A deviation takes place; all worldly things happen because, somewhere, an atom has swerved.

To describe this sort of deviation Badiou will often use a curious term, *pari*, meaning chance, bet, or gamble. In English, the word “chance” tends to evoke something like roulette, a slot machine, a roll of the dice, or other types of randomness. By “chance” Badiou meant something like “the unforeseeable” or “the non-necessary.” Chance does not mean freedom exactly, nevertheless for Badiou chance is linked to the classic philosophical questions of freedom and free choice. Here chance means something like “the thing that can not be predicted or predestined by the available conditions.”

It’s easy to see the appeal of this concept. Indeed a number of contemporary thinkers have gravitated toward swerve-thinking, toward a general swervitude. In several contemporary texts I detect a newfound interest in chance, accident, spontaneity, the wandering nature of matter. In many ways accident is the dominant theory of causality today. So let’s call them by their proper name, *the Swervers*.

The Swervers believe that the world, at its core, consists of consistency and accident. They believe, following Elizabeth Grosz, that the world is made up of “little shards of chaos” (*Chaos, Territory, Art*, 28). They conceive of matter as essentially “aleatory,” a word borrowed from the Latin meaning a throw of dice. There’s chance again, and the gambit is on gamble. For the Swervers there is no destiny or fate, but so too no overweening will or conscious determination. Instead there is primarily chaos,

contingency, chance, and spontaneous accident.

To collate and summarize what has been said thus far:

- *Swerver Aesthetics* means gaps, patchiness, messiness, slippages;
- *Swerver Ethics* means doing, action, production, creativity, experimentation, pragmatism;
- *Swerver Ontology* means becoming, process, deterritorialization;
- *Swerver Relationality* means assemblage, multiplicity, difference;
- *Swerver Causality* means chance, accident, chaos.

What are the consequences of Swerver theory? I will mention two things quickly before dwelling on a third consequence. I identified the first item already: this is a new kind of materialism. But this new materialism has specific qualities: a Lucretius revival, a Deleuzian hegemony, and the near elimination of Marx.

The second item has only been hinted at thus far. But it's clear that the Swervers are concurrent with the *Ethical Turn* in theory — which, in my reading, entails a concomitant waning of the political. In fact several details reveal a close consistency between the Swerves and a theory of ethics (a mutual attention to materiality, the discarding of morality and metaphysics, the law of the one, and so on).

The third consequence is potentially much more significant. I'll discuss it under the heading of "Nature's Largess." What is the meaning of this term? By Nature's Largess I refer to the assumption that some sort of material sufficiency exists, and that such a sufficiency has its source in nature or physical materiality. In other words largess exists, and the source of such largess is nonhuman. Largess might consist of agency or the right to act; it might refer to some sort of value, surplus, or excess; it might mean power, potency, or force; or, as we have seen, it might mean inclination, declination, accident, chaos — that general swervitude. Regardless of its qualities, largess means sufficiency first and foremost: a positive quality of being that is identifiable, expressible, and exercisable. The source of this largess is not God, and neither does it originate in Man. Rather the source of such boundless generosity is nature in whatever form, be it matter, reality, physicality, etc.

What's the problem? Shall we not simply smile and happily accept this kind of secular vitalism, admiring its generative capacity, its profound power, its awesome beauty? The problem with the concept of Nature's Largess, and the problem with the Swervers overall, is that both theories essentially mimic the old hoary structure of "God begets the world." Despite their secular credentials the Swervers in effect outsource agency to an external being, an external arbiter (specifically the largess of nature). An atom swerves within the void, but we know not how, like an act of God. Lightning strikes but we know not when or where. A stray bullet hits an innocent bystander, a seemingly inexplicable accident. As Lacan reportedly said to the Parisian Swervers in May '68: *If you demand a new master, you will have one!* In other words the swerve is nihilistic, but not nearly nihilistic enough. Accident is too rich. Chaos is too generative. Vibrancy is too aesthetic. All of this excess of sufficiency is sure indication of a new master. It may not look like the old one, but this new arbiter, this new outsourced agency, is a master indeed. And we will have to try harder, much harder, to deflect the excesses of this new master, to deflect the sufficiency of the swerve.

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